

**March 16, 2009**

**TESTIMONY**

**GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE**

**Re: SB 840 and HB 6375**

**Ellen Andrews, PhD**

**Executive Director**

Thank you for the opportunity to voice our strong opposition to SB 840 and HB 6375, bills that would eliminate Connecticut's Office of Healthcare Advocate (OHA) and its Advisory Committee. As a member of the OHA's Advisory Committee since its inception, I can testify that the office has grown to fill a critical role in protecting Connecticut consumers desperate to access the health care they need. The loss of this office would be devastating to consumers and to responsible oversight of state government.

OHA's caseload has increased every year and, given the current economic climate, that need is expected to accelerate. Despite increasing demand, a small but dedicated staff ably meets the need returning over \$5 million last year to Connecticut consumers in treatment and services denied by insurers. This office is a bargain for the state, returning \$5.07 to consumers for every dollar spent. As the Executive Director of a community organization that provides outreach and assistance to struggling health care consumers, we rely heavily on OHA to advocate for our complex clients.

In addition to individual casework, OHA has been able to secure critical changes to policies that served as barriers to consumers getting needed health care. These include a statutory definition of medical necessity, a law protecting consumers from unfair health insurance rescissions, cancellations or limitations of individual policies, and national advocacy to ensure mental health parity for every American while protecting the rights of Connecticut consumers.

As to the initiative to eliminate OHA's Advisory Committee along with dozens of other citizen advisory councils, this is exceptionally imprudent in these difficult economic times. Like the other members of this committee, and the other statutory councils I serve on, I serve as a volunteer. These commissions and committees provide state policymakers with access to expertise and knowledge that would be difficult or impossible to purchase. On a daily basis, the work of these committees is improving the health and welfare of all Connecticut residents through better policy, feedback from the "real world", and improved oversight. Rather than excluding the gift of valuable time and knowledge by state residents, the state should be celebrating it. I urge you to continue and expand the practice of leveraging the rich resources of our state's citizens through these commissions.

I urge you to reject both SB 840 and HB 6375 to ensure that OHA continues its growth and success in meeting the needs of Connecticut's struggling health care consumers. Thank you for your time and your commitment to excellence in public service.